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ABSTRACT

Little attention has been paid in composition journals and professional conferences to the practical problems associated with a writing program director's efforts to introduce an innovative composition curriculum within a traditional English department. A collaborative, problem solving approach to curriculum change is a practical way to proceed within the context of an established English department. Conflict between existing programs and recommended changes in those programs can be avoided if those involved in the change perceive the changes as addressing problems they themselves have identified and if the solutions recommended are not offered as panaceas but as the subject for experimentation and evaluation by the same group. The department of English at La Salle College (Philadelphia) became committed to a continuing evaluation of its writing program, to be monitored by a standing committee, through (1) circulation of a questionnaire to all of the faculty in the English department; (2) presentation of findings and recommendations to the faculty for approval; (3) selection of four textbooks representing several different approaches to teaching freshman composition; (4) development of a guide for teachers of freshman composition; and (5) the establishment of a series of workshops for freshman composition faculty. Such a process focused on the importance of convincing colleagues through their active participation in the process that the suggestions for both a change in objectives as well as teaching practices and course organization were related to the problems they perceived. (HOD)

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Changing the Composition Program: A Problem-Solving Approach

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Several recent articles in the WPA Journal[1] have discussed the role of the writing program administrator in effecting curriculum change. These articles emphasize that little attention has been paid in composition journals and professional conferences to the practical problems associated with a WPA's efforts to introduce an innovative composition curriculum within a traditional English Department. Gracie (WPA, Spring 1982) noted the absence of presentations on this subject at the 1979,1980 and 1981 CCCC's Conference. At the most recent conference the only two sessions dealing directly with this issue were the Special Session sponsored by the WPA ("Writing Program Administration: Dealing with the English Department") and a session which I proposed entitled "Effecting Change in Composition Programs." Interestingly enough, there were at least four sessions addressing the problems of implementing "writing across the curriculum" programs, although, in my view, it is often easier to start afresh with colleagues who willingly admit that they know little about the teaching of writing than it is for us to alter the teaching patterns of Engish

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Department faculty who have been teaching composition for twenty years.

Nevertheless, "improving" or changing the composition program is often the major task confronting a WPA, whether he or she is newly hired or is someone from within the Department who has been asked to "take charge." The desired reforms may involve structural changes in the curriculum (additional courses, diagnostic and/or competency examinations, writing-lab development) or curricular changes within a given course (changing the content and methods). Regardless of whether the person supervising composition instruction is a designated writing program administrator or the chairperson of a committee (as in my case), the writing "expert" is often expected to initiate great changes in instructional patterns having a long history within the department.

I believe that a collaborative, problem-solving approach to curriculum change, as advocated by many curriculum theorists, is a practical way to proceed within the context of an established English Department. A major concern in recent curriculum planning literature is the means by which the conflict between new programs and existing programs can be avoided.[2] If the potentially devastating effects of such conflict are ignored or minimized during the formative stages of curriculum change, then attempts at innovation will probably be short-lived if not defeated before they are even implemented. Conflict between existing programs and recommended changes in

those programs can be avoided if those involved in the changes perceive them as addressing problems they themselves have identified and if the solutions recommended are not suggested as assured panaceas but as the subject for experimentation and evaluation by the same group.

At a time when there is little consensus about the "best method" for teaching and much debate about the proper subject matter and organization of a composition course we must be able to defend our recommendations on the grounds that they address problems cited by the majority of those who will be affected by the changes. In response to the criticism that many of the English Department faculty will not know the problems if they have not been teaching writing recently I would add that in my experience they will be candid and defer to those who have been "tilling the soil" most recently.

After a year of deliberation, the Department of English at La Salle College (Philadelphia) became committed to an on-going evaluation of its writing program, to be monitored by a standing committee. What was thought of originally as a "one shot" effort to improve the program has resulted in a structure for implementing on-going curriculum changes, while providing opportunities for teachers to examine ideas and keep abreast of recent advances in the teaching of composition. My purpose in this paper is to explain how we arrived at this approach for overseeing the program, demonstrating along the way how much of what we did is in accord with modern curriculum theory. I will

also describe some of the materials we used to aid us and the changes we effected to illustrate how this process resulted in concrete reform.

One of the tenets of modern curriculum theory is that it is important to understand the specific context in which the change will take place, since a given process will probably not work in all institutions in quite the same way. The size of the institution, the experience of the faculty and their willingness to engage in the process, and the administrative constraints which govern the course will all influence the nature of the process and the type of changes that are actually possible. Although the same principles of effecting curriculum changes probably apply to most contexts, the process incorporating those principles can differ from institution to institution.

La Salle College is a medium-sized liberal arts institution with 4,000 day students. We offer approximately forty-two sections of freshman composition each year, about half of which are taught by a very stable part-time staff. La Salle has one required writing course (English 101), several elective writing courses, but no specifically designated remedial course. We do have a Writing Center that offers tutorial instruction to students on a one-on-one basis. Most of the writing instructors, including both full and part-time faculty, have had considerable experience teaching writing.

As is the case in many colleges, there was a general sense of dissatisfaction with the writing program, often centering on uncertainties about what to teach and the students' apparent lack of progress. The Department had recently instituted a competency examination and provided for the selection of a common textbook in order to insure uniformity among the many sections of the course. While the faculty were generally pleased with the book selection, administration of the competency examination proved difficult from its inception, essentially because instructors consistently disagreed on their evaluation of the papers (thereby causing the chairman considerable grief in his role as the final arbiter in these disputes). Most important, however, it did not appear that these changes were curing the perceived difficulties in the writing program. It seemed clear that the problems associated with English 101 were not be to solved exclusively by trying to create uniformity of content or by administration of a competency examination.

At this point the Department elected to systematize its approach. An instructor (me!) whose primary research interest is the teaching of composition was added to the full-time faculty and a committee, the Writing Program Study Committee, was established. All of the Committee members had frequently taught English 101 and expressed concern about the quality of writing instruction at La Salle. Most of them had given this subject considerable thought came to the early committee meetings with clear and often totally divergent recommendations. "What we need is a remedial course." "The trouble with English

101 is the underprepared student." "We should insist that every teacher focus on grammar." It took several heated discussions before we agreed to begin our work with a closer look at what was at that point a ill-defined problem rather than to exhaust ourselves in arguments about alternative solutions.

The plan of attack we finally adopted was in accord with recent thinking on the subject of effecting curriculum change.[3] We took several steps to ensure a systematic approach to exploring the problems and arriving at solutions. These included:

1. Circulation of a questionnaire to all of the faculty in the English Department.

2. Presentation of our findings and recommendations to the faculty for their approval.

3. Selection of four textbooks representing several different approaches to teaching freshman composition.

4. Development of a "Guide for Teachers of Freshman Composition" containing an explicit statement of the course requirements, some useful teaching aids, and a review of recent research relating to composition instruction.

5. Establishment of a series of workshops for English 101 faculty.

We spent considerable time developing the questionnaire. Its purpose was to enable us to test our hypothesis that the

stated objectives of the course were not consistent with the entering abilities of the students nor with the time available for instruction. In addition, we felt that some of the difficulties the faculty was experiencing were related to their present teaching approaches as well as to administratively imposed constraints on the number of students in each section, the composition of the class, and the time available for the course. Although at this point we could have made recommendations based on our own observations we believed it was important to ask our colleagues for their perceptions as well.

On the basis of their response to the questionnaire we concluded that many teachers were trying to cover too much material for a one semester composition course. They indicated that there was little time for instruction in specialized forms of academic discourse such as the research paper and the critical paper, although they felt that they were expected to include material of this type in their course. Many teachers thought that the "paper a week" requirement was excessive. There was a strong consensus that students were unfamiliar with the details of the composing process, possible because most teachers placed little emphasis on this aspect of composition. A common difficulty cited in teaching the course was the presence in each class of a small number of students whose writing skills were considerably weaker than the average.

The Committee came to the conclusion that while major alterations in the basic course content were probably

unwarranted, given the entering abilities of our students and the fact that there is only one required writing course, certain changes would be useful. These included limiting the course objectives, experimenting with new teaching approaches, especially those that encouraged increased familiarity with the composing process, and the extension of the role of the Writing Center in the freshman composition program.

The English Department faculty approved our recommendations and we proceeded to take steps to put them into effect. We wrote a manual entitled "A Guide for Teachers of Freshman Composition" to help disseminate our recommendations. We felt that it was particularly important to include them in a formal document because of the large number of adjunct faculty teaching the course. We also saw the "Guide" as serving the purpose of providing a point of departure for future discussion and change, and purposely distributed it in looseleaf binder form to indicate that the program was not "cast in concrete" but, on the contrary, was open to continuous review and change. In the same vein, all teachers were encouraged to suggest additions, usually in the form of instructional aids, which we intend to duplicate and add to the "Guide".

To help teachers develop a more process-oriented approach to teaching the course, we recommended that they choose one of four textbooks, three of which represented alternative approaches to process-oriented writing instruction: (Casebook Rhetoric: A Problem Solving Approach to Composition by Tedlock

and Jarvi,[4] The Random Hourse Guide to Writing by Schor and Fishman,[5] One to One: Resources for Conference-Centered Instruction by Dawes and Dornan[6]). However, we also included in our selections the Student's Book of College English by Skwire and Chitwood[7] for those instructors who wished to remain with a "models" approach. We also suggested some auxiliary texts for teachers to use in focusing on sentence level instruction if they felt the need for such a textbook. Here again we saw the chance to urge teachers to try new approaches, by suggesting as one of the texts the book The Writer's Option: Combining to Composing by Daiker, Karek and Morenberg.[8]

The Committee felt that simply providing a list of textbooks and even an invitation to examine them would not cause many faculty to actually adopt them. Accordingly, we hit upon the idea of circulating informal "book reviews" (written by the Committee members) which described our perception of each book's strengths and weaknesses in the context of La Salle College. We suspect that this type of introduction to new materials was at least partially responsible for the widespread acceptance of our recommendations by both the full and part-time faculty.

Faculty workshops were held at the beginning and during the course of the semester for the purpose of exchanging ideas about methodology. Several of these were organized along specific topics (the writing conference, the workshop approach, and methods for encouraging revision) while others were devoted

to discussions of the pros and cons of the recommended textbooks and their implied pedagogical approaches.

To meet the needs of students with severe deficiencies in sentence skills, we organized a series of sentence level workshops at the Writing Center. Although we briefly explored the possibility of introducing a remedial course, we decided that we would try a less dramatic solution before recommending a costly and administratively complicated program.

We consider the first year of implementation as the "pilot" phase of a new structure for the organizaton of English 101. We plan to look carefully at student evaluations to determine if they are more positive than those of past semesters. We are modifying our faculty questionaire (using the one distributed by the CCCC's Committee for Evaluating the Teaching of Writing as a model) to determine what instructors think about the new structure. I use the word "structure" rather than "curriculum" because in a sense we did more than revise a particular course. We had concluded that revising the course without establishing some mechanism for supporting that revision and evaluating its effectiveness represented a limited view of what curriculum change was all about, and would most likely not accomplish our aims.

What can we say we have accomplished? At the very least, we have made changes addressing a set of problems identified by a representative group of English Department faculty without incurring the wrath of anyone! Some teachers have continued to

use the text employed before we made the recommendations, but that is hardly disturbing. Even those who have not adopted our suggestions have examined them in the light of our recommendtions; that is all one can ask of any teacher, especially teachers whose long experience in teaching must naturally guide their judgment of new texts and methods. However,most instructors (both full and part time) have adopted our textbook recommendations and have come to the workshops. Most seem enthusiastic about both, and comfortable with the revised objectives and the reduced number of papers now required for the course. They are also delighted with the systematic assistance provided by the Writing Center in dealing with weak students. Some are particularly enthusiastic about their experimentation with new modes of instruction such as in-class conferences. One instructor using in-class conferencing for the first time had this to say:

> My students and I have accrued profit and pleasure from the "One to One" approach to English composition. Students are pleased with the uncommon amount of individual attention I can give them, and with the opportunity to do most of their writing in class. I find gratification in the real improvement I see in their writing,more than I saw when I used the lecture and discussion methods. I've especially enjoyed the constant one-to-one contact.
>
> At the beginning of the term, I would have reported differently. Then our three-ring circus gravely overtaxed the ringmaster's capacity. Everyone wanted continual attention, and despite my authors' warning, I let conferences run much too long. But now we're down to a successful one-ring show where jugglers keep several balls airborne at once, and positive reinforcement tames most wild beasts. Attendance figures are the best I've ever had in a comp class. My paper load is half of what it used to be, since I get to read about 50% of final drafts with students in

> class. One smallish drawback is that while my attention is engaged by a conferee, some students are tempted to chat rather than work, but a glower or a word from me usually ends the goldbricking.

Certainly not all of our instructors have transformed their teaching practices with the same degree of satisfaction and success experienced by this instructor. Many are still skeptical about the benefits of such activities as peer-group work and conferencing in the class and unsure of their ability to orchestrate such activities. Just as we acknowledge the difficulty of changing the slowly developing habits of student writers, we must also recognize the difficulty of changing long ingrained teaching practices, even when the teachers are interested in making the change.

The process we used to change the composition curriculum focused on the importance of convincing our colleagues through their active participation in the process that our suggestions for both a change in objectives as well as teaching practices and course organization were related to the teaching problems they perceived. The next step is for them to experiment with these new objectives and methods in their own classrooms to determine for themselves whether our suggestions do indeed address those problems. William Coles is probably right when he says, "...what teaches finally is less a set of assumptions about how writing ought to be taught, or even a set of methods for implementing the assumptions, than a teacher's belief in his or her assumptions, the degree to which he or she is able to enact a commitment to his or her methods."[9] Coles'

statement and a certain amount of humility should influence those of us who embark on curriculum reform projects in the teaching of writing.

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